

From Urban Involution to Proletarian Transformation

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Article abstract

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FROM 'URBAN INVOLUTION TO PROLETARIAN TRANSFORMATION': NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE GEOGRAPHY OF DEVELOPMENT IN THE THIRD WORLD

by

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ABSTRACT

Broad types and stages in the geography of development are identified. Notwithstanding their interest, these approaches have not adequately explained the processes of development, such as growth of wage labour. In earlier studies of these processes, during the sixties and seventies, the author had foreseen that proletarianization of labour would not occur rapidly in Southeast Asia. This proved to be wrong. The basic reason for this lack of foresight was due to the narrow definition of proletarian transformation for which a broader definition is still needed. A model is proposed to better understand how capitalist expansion penetrates non-proletarian activities. Felt needs and patterns of consumption must also be examined. Desire to obtain consumer needs can actually act as a factor of proletarianization. The question of the dislocation of non-proletarian activities appears crucial both in the agricultural and non-agricultural settings and a search for better theoretical understanding of these empirical processes is essential.

KEY WORDS: Processes of proletarianization, Third World, Southeast Asia, capitalist expansion, consumption patterns, dislocation of non-proletarian activities, geographical theories.

RÉSUMÉ

De l'involution urbaine à la transformation prolétarienne : nouvelles perspectives pour la géographie du développement dans le Tiers-Monde

Les principaux types et les principales étapes de la géographie du développement sont identifiés. Malgré leur intérêt, ces approches n'ont pas permis de bien comprendre les processus du développement, notamment ceux de la croissance du salariat. Dans des études réalisées au cours des années soixante et soixante-dix, l'auteur avait prédit que la prolétarianisation n'allait pas s'accroître rapidement en Asie du Sud-Est. Cela s'avéra faux. La principale raison de cette erreur de prévision réside dans l'étroitesse de la définition de la prolétarianisation. Une meilleure définition est nécessaire. À cette fin, un modèle est proposé pour faciliter la compréhension de l'expansion capitaliste au sein des activités non salariées. Il est aussi nécessaire d'étudier les besoins et habitudes de consommation car le désir de satisfaire ces besoins peut favoriser la prolétarianisation. La question de la déstabilisation des activités non salariées semble cruciale au sein tant du secteur agricole que du secteur non agricole. La recherche de meilleures approches théoriques de ces processus empiriques est essentielle.

MOTS-CLÉS: Processus de prolétarianisation, Tiers-Monde, Asie du Sud-Est, expansion capitaliste, habitudes de consommation, déstabilisation des activités non salariées, théories géographiques.

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"At the heart of the predictions for the decline of non-wage labour in agriculture, there lies a rather unilineal set of assumptions about the nature of social evolution, on the direction of 'progress'. Ironically, these assumptions seem to be shared by both the American 'modernization' school and by those who utilize Marx's analysis of the development of capitalism in an excessively rigid manner, applying it outside the context for which it was written."

Joachim VOSS, 1982, p. 2

INTRODUCTION

The geographical investigation of the process of development in Third World countries has passed through three historical stages. First, a phase of Western domination roughly equated with the colonial era. Second, a phase of western concern emerging in the nineteen fifties and finally a period from the sixties which has seen the rise of research by Third World geographers on their own countries.

Each of these phases was characterized by a particular focus. In the first period, the Third World was a region to be carved up for academic advantage. Much of the geographical research concentrated upon interpreting Third World countries for Western audiences. It was a time for the production of regional texts such as Dobby's (1950) *Southeast Asia*, Gourou's (1953) *L'Asie*, James (1954) *Latin America* which attempted to synthesize the regional geography of these countries for Western audiences.

A second phase, characterized by a greater concern with problems of development in Third World countries interpreted from a geographic perspective, occurred from 1955. At the risk of oversimplification, three main schools of thought can be identified in these approaches. First, those geographic practitioners of the *conventional wisdom* who attempted to sensitize geographers to the role they could play in the assessment of the development process. In furthering this attitude, *Essays on Geography and Economic Development* (edited by Ginsburg in 1960) was important for it outlined many elements of the geographic approach. These methodologies were further developed in the work of the *modernization* diffusionists which were carried out in Kenya (Soja, 1968) Tanzania (Gould, 1970), Sierra Leone (Riddell, 1970) and Malaya (Leinbach, 1972). Later work concentrated on systematic components of the development process such as industrialization, population change, etc. Underlying this research was an implicit assumption that the development process was creating countries in the Third World which would be similar to those of the developed industrialized world.

A second strand of this approach is represented by the group of geographers who did not agree with this assumption and took a far more critical view of this development process, often utilizing some variant of the Marxist paradigm. Important in this respect were the work of French geographers such as George (1946), Tricart

(1962a, 1962b), Lacoste (1967, 1976) and Suret-Canale (1967). In the Anglo-Saxon tradition were a series of studies by Buchanan (1962, 1964, 1967, 1970, 1972) and later writers such as Slater (1973, 1975, 1976). This approach has been most recently summarized by Forbes (1984).

A final strand of these approaches to the geography of development is represented by geographers who have done extensive fieldwork in Third World countries focussing upon specific geographic problems such as population improvement, the growth of squatter settlements, etc. and problems of agricultural change. The list of researchers is too long to catalogue here but typical is the work of Brookfield (1962, 1973, 1975).

A third and final phase of geographic writing on the development of Third World countries has been characterized by the proliferation of research by indigeneous Third World geographers such as Salih and Lo (1977) which appear to be blending the findings of dependency theory and fieldwork into a theoretical paradigm for development that lays great emphasis upon the particular mix of geographic components that occur within each Third World country, the historical patterns of these States' incorporation into the world economy and, in particular, the role of Third World elites in the development process.

Despite these significant developments in the scope of the "geography of development" it can still be argued that it has been deficient in the analysis of the processes that bring about this development. Using the example of growth of wage labour in Southeast Asian countries this paper attempts to remedy this deficiency. The paper focusses upon three central theoretical problems which complicate the analysis of the process, arguing that geographers need to explore the theoretical underpinnings of empirically measured processes if they are to interpret reality with any degree of accuracy or sensitivity. These problems are as follows:

1. The problem of the narrow definition of "proletarianization" and its relationship to theories of sectoral labour force transformation and the urbanization process.
2. The problem of the formulation of a broader conceptual framework to analyze the process of proletarianization.
3. The problem of dislocation from non-proletarian activities.

The next section of the paper discusses these three problems. This is followed by suggestions for the more effective incorporation of theoretical analysis into geographic research in Third World countries.

THE PROBLEM OF THE NARROW DEFINITION OF "PROLETARIANIZATION"¹

The most simple definition of proletarianization is the process whereby *non-proletarian* (peasants, tribesmen, pre-capitalists, etc.) sell their labour for *wages* or *salary*, either on a permanent or semi-permanent basis. It was in this sense that the process was interpreted in the author's *The Southeast Asian City* (1967) and *The Third World Urbanization* process (1971c). Looking specifically at Southeast Asia and collecting data culled largely from the 1960 round of censuses there were grounds for profound pessimism concerning the prospects of the urban transformation in Southeast Asia primarily because it seemed so unlikely that the economies of these

countries would grow in such a manner as to allow the absorption of the non-proletarianization labour force into primarily urban proletarian labour relations. So much so that I labelled the urbanization process as "*pseudo urbanization*" arguing that the manner of insertion of Southeast Asian countries into the world economy together with a different mix of demographic and social factors were operating in a manner to inhibit the process of proletarianization such as occurred in Western countries.

In this situation the emerging scenario appeared to be one in which growing city populations would be absorbed into a labour force sector characterized by self or family employment, low productivity and a heavy concentration in the service sector. A process which was labelled *urban involution* borrowing the concept from the fertile imagination of Clifford Geertz (1963). In such a phase cities seemed simply built containers for urban poverty, with small enclaves of highly productive modern proletarian activity in firms that were often foreign-owned. Such visions were reinforced by extensive travel in Indonesia at the beginning of the 1960s. While I recognized the very great diversity within Southeast Asia I was persuaded that "urban involution" would be a dominant feature of Southeast Asia for a considerable period.²

In this judgement I was pathetically incorrect. By the early 1970s it was obvious that the expansion of the world international economy in the long boom which went on from 1945 to the OPEC oil crisis of the early 1970s, together with economic policies adopted by individual States of the region under the broad ideological umbrella of "economic development" had fuelled an expansion of capitalism in the region which was accelerating the process of proletarianization both in cities and countryside. This process was however, quite uneven between States and within States: a fact recognized in some of my papers published in 1971 (McGee, 1971a, 1971b, 1971c).

Almost a decade later, although we do not have comprehensive census data, it would appear that this process has been further accelerated in the States of Southeast Asia variously integrated into the international capitalist system. Table 1 indicates some of the broad macro-features of this process but, of course, does not address itself to the process of proletarianization as we have narrowly defined earlier. For this we need employment status data either from censuses or labour force surveys. And even if we have that data there are great difficulties in using it realistically because of the problems of accurate definition of labour force participation due to the temporal variations and multiple patterns of proletarian employment.³

Rather, it seems that one must rely upon data collected at the village or urban sub-unit level which involves longitudinal characteristics even though it is perilous to argue too generally from this base. To take just a few examples from recent studies: Collier *et al* (1982) reports accelerating off-farm employment and movement to the cities for employment in construction and factories in 26 villages studied over 10 years in lowland Java. Rogers' resurveyed village of Songai Raya in Malaysia exhibits a marked increase in out-migration of both men and women to proletarian work in nearby Muar and Johore Baharu (Rodgers 1982). Kikuchi's work in the Philippines shows a rapid growth of migration, some of international at the village level to construction and service proletarian occupations (Kikuchi, 1982). McGee (1980) has assembled some data for the urban areas which indicate increasing proletarianization.

It seems then that I was wrong in underestimating the expansion rate of the capitalist system; a proletarian transformation (narrowly defined) is in process in Southeast Asia.

Table 1
Selected Data of Asian Market Economies

	Population (mid 1982) (millions)	Average Annual Growth of Population		Urban Population Percentage of Total Population		Average Annual Growth Rate of Urban Population		Agriculture		Percentage of Labour Force in			
		1960-1970 (%)	1970-1982 (%)	1960 (%)	1982 (%)	1960-70 (%)	1970-82 (%)	1960 (%)	1980 (%)	Industry		Services	
										1960 (%)	1980 (%)	1960 (%)	1980 (%)
TYPE I													
Hong Kong	5.2	2.5	2.4	89	91	3.1	2.4	8	3	52	57	40	40
Singapore	2.5	2.4	1.5	100	100	2.4	1.5	8	2	23	39	69	59
Taiwan	18.4	2.7	1.9	36	68	3.7	3.2	56	20	11	33	33	47
Korea Rep.	39.3	2.4	1.7	28	61	6.2	5.0	66	34	9	29	25	37
TYPE II													
Malaysia	14.5	2.9	2.5	25	30	3.5	3.4	63	50	12	16	25	34
Philippines	50.7	3.0	2.7	25	38	4.2	3.8	61	46	15	17	24	37
TYPE III													
Thailand	48.5	3.1	2.4	12	17	4.7	4.3	84	76	4	9	12	15
Sri Lanka	15.2	2.4	1.7	18	24	4.4	2.5	56	54	13	14	31	32
TYPE IV													
Bangladesh	92.9	2.9	2.6	5	12	4.7	6.0	87	74	3	11	10	15
Burma	34.9	2.2	2.2	19	28	3.7	3.9	68	67	11	10	21	23
India	717.0	2.3	2.3	18	24	3.5	3.9	73	71	11	13	16	16
Indonesia	152.6	2.2	2.3	15	22	3.7	4.5	75	58	8	12	17	30
Pakistan	87.1	2.4	3.0	18	29	4.5	4.3	61	57	18	20	21	23

Source: Dillinger (1979), World Bank (1979), World Bank (1984).

THE PROBLEM OF THE FORMULATION OF A BROADER CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO ANALYZE THE PROCESS OF PROLETARIANIZATION

The real reason for underestimating the extent of the proletarian transformation is theoretical. By concentrating too narrowly on the labour relations aspect of proletarianization, the complex nature of capitalist expansion and dislocation of the non-proletarian sector has been underestimated. This is where the more recent Marxist analyses have made their contribution. There are, of course, a large number of complex and sometimes contradictory currents running through this literature. They range from theoretical frameworks that utilize the constantly changing articulation of capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production (e.g. Wolpe, 1978) to those that place less emphasis on articulation and argue for a limitation of real subsumption of labour by capital, as a condition of ongoing peripheral capitalism (Amin, 1974). Other theories reject the modes of production approach and argue for the collapse of pre-capitalist social relations and incorporation into the "world system" in a condition of ongoing underdevelopment (Frank, 1967; Wallerstein, 1974). Still others have emphasized the particular form of capital (merchant and industrial) as a major determinant of the conditions of capitalist expansion (Kay, 1975).

It is not my intention to review this rather bewildering array of approaches of which there is an excellent summary in Goodman and Redcliff (1981) but rather to suggest that while they have greatly enriched the analysis of capitalist expansion and non-proletarian incorporation in the Third World, they have not yet provided fully comprehensive theoretical frameworks.

The reason for this lies at least in part in the problem of handling *scale* and *causality*. The scale of much Marxist analysis is of such generality that its value for explaining empirical events at a micro-level is of limited value. In much of this analysis the complexity of the capitalist system and its forms of expansion are somehow compressed in such a manner that large, vague theoretical components (merchant capital) are said to explain certain processes such as the rate of proletarianization. It is not that the kind of statement that says "merchant capital" conserves and utilizes non-proletarian labour to extract exchange commodities and is therefore less likely to set in motion dislocative proletarian processes, is incorrect at a very general structural level; the problem lies in the generality of the *scale* and assumption of *causality*.

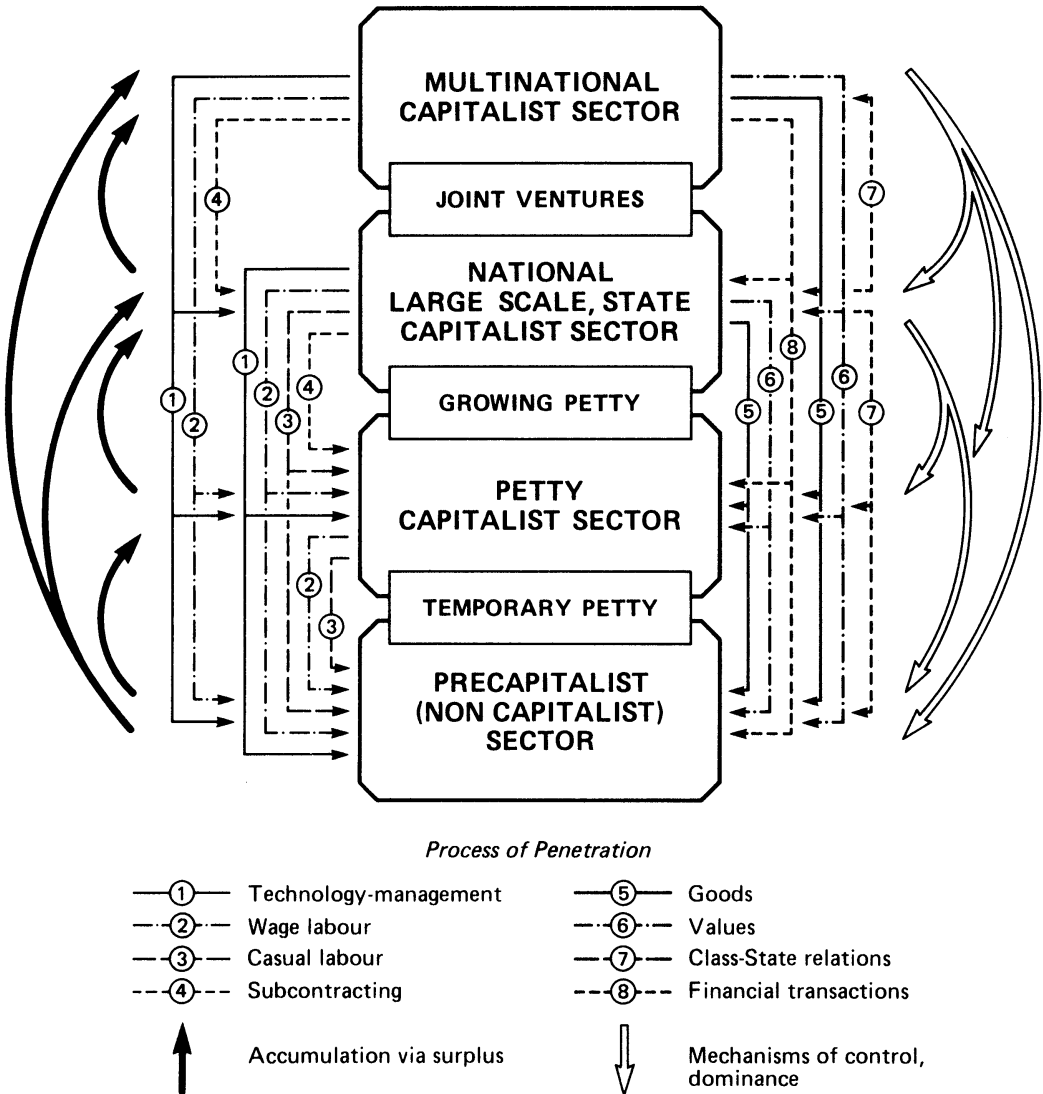
A more accurate theoretical approach to such a question must surely take into account the complex nature of capitalism, its relationship with the State, and the often unique mixtures of resource endowment, demographic and cultural conditions of a given society, the historical patterns of its incorporation into the international economy and particular development ideologies.

I would argue that we need a more complex model of the manner in which the capitalist expansion penetrates non-proletarian activities. I have designed a model (figure 1) which attempts to show the diverse ways in which capitalist penetration acts, occurs, the manner in which it is related to various capital sectors both international, national and petty capitalist. The mechanisms that fuel this process are the ability of various capital sectors to control and dominate the means of production with the purpose of appropriating surplus value (accumulation).

While such a model is descriptive I would argue that it is more helpful in explaining the often contradictory processes of capitalist expansion than many of the more recent theories discussed in the earlier part of this section. For instance, how do

Figure 1

CAPITALIST PENETRATION AND ACCUMULATION



we accommodate the complicated problem of a situation such as Malaysia's, where state policies, in collaboration with international capital, are designed to increase the peasants' (non-proletarians) productivity and ensure their control of land, and are being subverted by the activities of multinational capital in liaison with national capital. This creates more needs for commodities which can only be purchased with increased monetary income. With insufficient income from on-farm activities the peasant's response is to increasingly seek off-farm employment. Thus these capitalist sectors set up quite contradictory processes at the non-proletarian level.

I would argue that this model needs to be linked with another model which shows the various spheres of capitalist penetration although I must admit I have no clear idea how to do this except in an explanatory way for each empirical investigation. The simplest form of this model would show the various spheres of capitalist penetration in terms of a rather standard division of a given economy in the spheres of production, circulation and consumption. I know it is a contentious statement, but I would argue that in the many parts of the Third World it is at the level of consumption that the most dislocative processes are being generated for the non-proletarian populations.

The considerable technological improvements at the circulation level (transport) which facilitate the movement of commodities and labour together with the growth of information flows (television, education, improvements in literacy, etc.) have greatly facilitated the ability of the international and national capitalist sectors to create felt needs for people in Third World countries.⁴ It is well known that there is also a class dimension to this process. The styles and patterns of consumption of the national bourgeoisie which imitate those of the advanced capitalist countries are held-up as the models of life-style which Third World populations wish to emulate.

To quote one commentary on Malaysia urban life :

"Status appears to be the name of the game in the rise of fast food popularity. In Malaysia, where a car sticker bearing the name of an overseas university can open doors, and where office workers plunk down a month's wages to buy a belt with a designer buckle, chomping American burgers and guzzling root beer helps promote the wished for 'man about town image'" (Robinson, 1982, p. 7).

My own view is that the essential qualities of consumption and circulation are becoming similar throughout the Third World, a similarity most obvious in the built environments, transport and lifestyles of the cities but also increasingly a feature of the countryside.⁵ It is important to note that the changes in circulation characterized by greater speed of goods and information are crucial to the changes occurring in the consumption sphere. If sameness is a feature of consumption and circulation in the Third World, this is not so of the production sphere with the exception of import substitution industrialization which virtually all Third World countries have attempted. In export, manufacturing diversity characterizes the Third World with some countries dominant and others remaining as essentially raw material suppliers to advanced capitalist countries.

This production diversity is often explained by the phrase "the new international division of labour." It would seem that in the period of expansion of the world capitalist economy which has occurred, we have seen a situation in which international capital (multinational), often in conjunction with the national State, has expanded its control at both the consumption and circulation levels. It has done so in such a manner that capitalist expansion in such areas as food consumption, dress, information flows, has been greatly facilitated by increases in the speed of circulation. This latter process has also aided the increasing international division of labour in the productive sphere.

Thus the process of proletarianization is being fuelled by a complex pattern of capitalist expansion. Among the non-proletariat there are those who are forced out of their non-proletarian activities by direct dislocation such as loss of control of the means of production (e.g. land); there are those that are forced into the proletariat because of a desire to satisfy consumer needs which are above and beyond the level of basic needs. It is this latter group that I would argue is becoming of greater importance in many Third World countries which have experienced rapid economic growth in the sixties and seventies. I would further argue that this process of consumption has been underestimated as a cause of proletarianization.

But non-proletarians still have some control over their decision to enter wage labour, particularly when they retain control of the means of production. But here again this may not be enough.

THE PROBLEM OF DISLOCATION FROM NON-PROLETARIAN ACTIVITIES

The question of the "control" of the "non-proletariat" over their labour is of course central to this paper and in the next section I discuss it under two headings: a) as it relates to the agricultural non-proletariat, and b) the non-agricultural non-proletariat.

The agricultural non-proletariat

The problem of "sustainability" of rural non-proletarian activities in the face of capitalist penetration has become a central issue among researchers in rural areas of the Third World. Simply put, as I understand it, the crux of the problem as developed earlier in Chayanov (1966) and Franklin (1969), can be stated as follows. While peasants have been subordinated to capitalism through the reconstruction of their production process to include the production of commodities for exchange value, their means of production have not been expropriated and their "moral order" remains essentially pre-proletarian (Scott, 1976). They are thus able to resist the efforts of the State and capital at further penetration (Shanin 1971). It is argued that traditional systems of labour relations and of (reciprocity) social relationships and ideology act to reinforce this resilience. With this argument I have no quarrel for it is patently the case, but it takes insufficient account of the various ways by which the capitalism and the State begin to dislocate the peasantry.

On the basis of a fieldwork of high quality De Koninck has shown, for example, that the peasants of the MUDA project in Kedah, Malaysia, while experiencing increases in productivity and income, are increasingly losing control of the tools of production but not their land. The technological changes of the Green Revolution have meant that the peasants have increasingly lost control of the irrigation systems; the technological inputs and various processes of planting and harvesting, are becoming more mechanized and controlled by managers and entrepreneurs who inform but are not informed by the peasant.⁶ The consequences are that collective labour is becoming less important, and more off-farm employment is sought. It is first and foremost the labour of women that is disqualified by machines and offered at low prices on the market but men are also moving into proletarian employment.

De Koninck argues that this process of losing control of the tools of production is as effective as losing control of land. Thus capitalism penetrating at many levels can

act to dislocate non-proletarian work in the countryside.⁷ When this is associated with the penetration of consumerism mere possession of land is no guarantee of the continuation of the peasantry.

Other models have been presented of the proletarianization of the peasantry including the well-known models of Lenin of *internal proletarianization* in which landlords took the land of their tenants and *external proletarianization* based on increasing differentiation among small holders and the emergence of a "kulak class" whose farms expel labour and attract labour from outside.⁸ In evaluating this process of capitalist penetration into agriculture, Lenin's statement seems particularly apt, although the "slowly" adverb must be modified in the light of events since the "Green Revolution".

"Capitalism penetrates into agriculture particularly slowly and in extremely varied forms... Each of these bears traces of a specific agrarian system, of a specific history of agrarian relations" (Lenin, 1967, p. 181).

The non-agricultural non-proletariat

The problem of the "dislocation" of non-proletarian labour into the non-agricultural setting is no less complex than that of the peasantry and has been the subject of much of my concern over the last ten years. I have been wavering between a kind of "utopianism" as expressed in my Proto-Proletariat paper of the mid-nineteen seventies and hawker studies (McGee, 1976a, 1976b) which tried to present liberal policy options for the state hell-bent on eliminating them. I have come to the conclusion most clearly expressed in the "Invitation to the Ball, Formal or Informal Dress" paper (McGee 1978a) that there was little point in attempting to thwart the processes of capitalist penetration, aided and abetted by the State and bureaucrats caught up in the image of Western cities in which they had been trained (McGee 1978b, 1979).

Since it has been the subject of so much of my writing I will not review the aspects here but simply make reference to the various papers that deal with this subject. One aspect, however, which has not been tackled in this writing except rather tangentially is the discussion of the capacity of non-proletarian groups to *preserve* their activities because of cultural advantages. An example is the case of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asian cities. Where this problem has emerged most clearly relates to the relative importance of ethnicity as opposed to class, particularly in the urban system.

This is a very similar problem to that of the "resilience of the peasantry" and has been the subject of research in Africa⁹, Latin America¹⁰ and Asia¹¹. On the whole I find it unusual that researchers should be surprised at the ability of the non-proletarian groups to "preserve" and "protect" their activities against capitalist expansion. The role of ethnicity and culture (whether it be traditional or new hybrids, e.g. Rastafari) is significant in helping people to cope with the intrusion of capitalism and sometimes in slowing down the rate of proletarianization. In each specific situation it will be necessary to determine the importance of these "preserving tendencies" in relation to the level of development of capitalist relations.

CONCLUSION

The thrust of this paper has been to suggest that geographers need to engage in much deeper analyses of the processes that shape the geography of particular places.

Geographers would be well aware to heed the advice of Koestler (1969) in his discussion of the development of art. Koestler suggests that artistic creation tends to get bogged down in long periods of "normality" which produce two types of reaction. The first is a tendency towards *pointed emphasis* characterized by a certain involution and concentration upon mannerisms, technique and jargon. The second is a tendency towards what he calls *economy or implicitness* which is a trend from the obvious to the oblique of the implicit in which the underlying processes must be explored even when they are almost invisible at these levels of empirical analysis. In this task, theoretical understanding is a necessary shaper of the investigation and *pointed emphasis* an avoidance of the challenge. The geography of development will be greatly enhanced if it takes up the challenge of exploring the theoretical underpinnings of the process of development.

NOTES

¹ See McGee (1978a) for an expanded version of this section.

² This judgement was reinforced by large doses of early "dependency and core-periphery models theory" as delivered by André Gunder Frank (1967) and the use of dualistic models of labour force participation. For a critical view of these views see Browning and Roberts (1980).

³ The problems of accurate definition of the labour force participation in various industrial sectors is very complicated in the Asian context where many people engage in more than one activity and household labour inputs are not always recorded adequately (see Hauser, 1971, 1972), McGee (1979a, 1980) and Breman (1976, 1978).

⁴ See Lagbao and Pa (1981).

⁵ See Friedmann and Wolff (1982), Cohen (1981) and Armstrong and McGee (1985).

⁶ The most important statement is De Koninck (1983). He bases his theoretical ideas on the work of Claude Raffestin and Mercedes Bresso (1979) and Andrew Pearse (1980).

⁷ Interesting corroborative evidence for Indonesia is produced by Collier et al (1982).

⁸ See Goodman and Redcliff (1981).

⁹ See Chapter 6 of Richard Sandbrook (1982).

¹⁰ See Roberts (1978) for a discussion of this phenomenon in Latin America.

¹¹ See Zawawi Ibrahim (1982), Sundaram (1977), Lim Mah Hui (1980), Bach (1976) and Shamsul (1979) for a review of this question in Malaysia.

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